HOW TO BE A CHRISTIAN WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

July 12, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 10:25-28

"a lawyer...said...'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'"
-Luke 10:25 (NRSV)

Perhaps you are old enough to remember a Broadway musical with the engaging title "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying." It was an enormous hit. And best of all from my perspective, its star Robert Morris was married to a high school friend of mine. So when it came to Chicago, I left school and learning how to be a minister to see a matinee. The play had fun with the way corporations seem sometimes to reward a person for skills and abilities which have very little to do with the actual business of the corporation.

The lead character, Finch, advanced from the stockroom all the way up the corporate ladder not on the basis of his knowledge of the business or his management expertise, but rather charm, luck, nerve, and endless self-confidence. The showstopper, I recall, happens when Finch has finally been given the ultimate symbol of corporate success - his own key to the executive wash-room. He enters the hallowed place, leans over a sink, looks at himself in the mirror and sings, "I Believe in You."

It was a great show and it spawned a flurry of "How to Succeed..." books. One of them was written by a very witty Methodist clergyman, Charles Merrill Smith, who at the time was serving a church in Bloomington, Illinois. Smith's book was entitled How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious. It is both out of date and, I assume, out of print; but the thesis is not, namely that there ought to be and often is a way to do what you want to do without paying your dues, without sacrifice and hard work. There ought to be a shortcut somewhere.

So Smith advised Methodists who aspired to be Bishops (Presbyterians are allowed to poke fun at Methodists you see, because we don't have Bishops and so there is no attempting to get ahead anywhere in our church; nor is there any ecclesiastical ladder climbing anywhere in our system) to adopt a "professional

stance, or the techniques of being unmistakably clerical" - to think, act and most important of all, dress "in a way that says - holy, righteous, minister..." Aspiring Bishops are advised to ruthlessly suppress any taste they might have for flamboyant clothes; to carefully choose the right car for in front of the manse - "a black, standard shift, two-door Ford Falcon" was Smith's recommendation; and most important, clergy who want to succeed must cultivate expertise in "living the inhibited life." "The average Protestant Church in America is made up of people who are only a few decades removed from their Puritan ancestors and who have not yet succeeded in shaking themselves free from the conviction that a Christian is one who doesn't enjoy this world very much." [p. 13] It's in this section of the book that Smith recommends as appropriate clergy recreation - checkers, chess (only if it's a college community), tennis is all right because you can play rigorously but everyone is dressed modestly and behaves properly - he wrote two decades before Aggassi and McEnroe obviously, and the perfect game, the ideal clergy recreation - croquet - "no one gets very excited about it, no one swears over a poor shot, it is inexpensive, and it doesn't work up a sweat." [p. 13]

And I was reminded of all that - "How to succeed in business," "How to get ahead in the church" without personal sacrifice - by the story of a man who one day asked Jesus "how he could be a Christian without being religious." He is, I think, one of the most provocative and understandable people in the New Testament. He remains anonymous. We know only that he was a lawyer, that he came to test Jesus, and that he asked the best question anybody ever asked anyone, "What must I do to inherit eternal life."

Now, if you go to church much, and if you listen to sermons, you have heard a lot of sermons on the story Jesus told this lawyer as a kind of answer to his question because what comes next is the parable of the Good Samaritan - the man beaten by robbers, left to die, bypassed by two religious officials, finally a Samaritan, a racial and religious outcast stops, takes care of him, carries him to safety. That story is Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question, and what happens before the lawyer asked his question is pretty interesting as well. Jesus had sent seventy people to go ahead of him - advance parties - to the villages he planned to visit. They had done so. They had accomplished their mission. Their return and reunion with Jesus was enthusiastic, happy. He was pleased with them. It is a warm and affectionate moment. And the lawyer, I think, witnessing this happy reunion asks his question, "What must I do?" and then fades because of the magnificent answer he received.

For now, I want to focus on him, however, give him his hour on stage, because his question is good and because I think what he is saying is "there must be a shortcut; there must be a way to

succeed, to gain the kind of life I want without doing all the things your disciples do. I'd like to be a Christian without being religious."

Jesus turns the question - "What is written is the law? What do you read there?" The lawyer knows the answer to his own question. It's his business to know law.

> "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

The lawyer recited it back to Jesus automatically. "You have given the right answer; "do this, and you will live," Jesus said.

Note that understanding it isn't the point. Jesus does not say: "Right answer - you shall live." Rather, "Right answer; do it and you will live." You can that is to say, get an A on the test and still flunk the course.

The story that follows expands, amplifies and deepens the tradition by defining love for God and neighbor in terms of concrete, helpful, life-giving service to a needy person. But the original formula stands:

Love God, with heart, soul, mind and strength. It's as old as the Hebrew people. It is part of the Shema, "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone...love the Lord with heart, soul and might..." [Deuteronomy 6:4,5]

And "neighbor as self..." Jesus didn't invent it. It's equally old, in the middle of a ritual and holiness code in the Book of Leviticus, which essentially repeats the Ten Commandments and adds, "...You shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord." [19:18]

This is real Biblical fundamentalism, at the very heart of both Judaism and Christianity, a common ground we and our Jewish neighbors walk together.

St. Paul, battling the legalists in the early church in the city of Galatia - the ones who were worried that new Christians weren't paying enough attention to the traditional moral code, St. Paul said:

> "The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" [Galatians 5:14]

And near the end of his life, writing his great summation of the faith to the Christians at Rome:

> "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... The commandments...are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbors as yourself'" [Romans 13:8,9]

Why doesn't this bright, earnest, intelligent man get it? He knows the old answer, what's wrong? Well one of the problems the Jewish tradition has experienced, and one which the Christian tradition equally shares, is a tendency toward legalism - the rulebook approach to religion, being a Christian by following rules. Sometimes having a lot of rules sounds like a good idea. Particularly when the world out there looks unstable, fragile, and the future looks frightening, it seems like a good idea to tighten our ethical belts, dust off the old rules and call it a recovery and reenergizing of traditional values.

It happens all the time in history. When the people of Israel finally made it back home after a harrowing couple of generations in Babylonian captivity they said to themselves, "never again. Whatever went wrong, we will do everything we can not to repeat the mistakes of the past... we will follow all the rules: we will create rules about rules: we will have rules about who gets to read and interpret the rules." Legalism, in its moral fervor, its obsession with always doing the required thing, often misses the point. So God has to find prophets to tell the people that in the middle of their rulebook religion, they are not getting it. They're missing the point. In their obsession to follow all the rules they are forgetting that God really wants what is justice for all people - kindness, compassion and love.

The legalists hounded Jesus, following him everywhere he went, accusing him of breaking the rules about what to eat, where to eat, with whom to eat and drink and associate, accusing him of breaking Sabbath rules and dietary rules and cleanliness rules.

Roman Catholic scholar Gregory Baum wrote once: "The roots of legalism are situated in the human psyche: for the legalist mentality is even found in people who have little to do with religion. Unfortunately, religion readily lends itself to legalist misunderstanding."

So maybe what the lawyer wanted was a new set of rules about how to love God thoroughly and neighbor as self. And somewhere in each of us we'd like that too. We'd like a clear set of guidelines about how to be a faithful Christian in this complicated world. We'd very much appreciate some guidelines or, better yet, some simple rules about the appropriate Christian position in questions of sexual morality, in family values, in

who gets condoms and how, in who has the right to an abortion, under what circumstances and who pays for it. But you won't find rules like that in the stories about Jesus or the stories he told. What you find, says New Testament scholar Fred Craddock, is not patent medicine but individual prescriptions [see Luke, Interpretation, p. 149]. What you find instead of a set of rules is a story about how love acts personally and responsibly in a specific situation full of risk and ambiguity.

The lawyer wanted something simpler and plainer than the plain and simple tradition of loving God thoroughly and neighbor as self. In a recent article in the Christian Century, Martin Marty cites an essay by Marc Gunther about "High Concept News Stories." Why, Marty wonders, do we get excited about relatively minor problems and don't raise an eyebrow about the big problems. Why, to quote John Frohmeyer, former head of the National Endowment for the Arts, a Christian ethicist by training and a good Presbyterian, do the headlines trumpet and the public revel in the news that there are three or four offensive NEA grants - out of 30,000 or so - the total cost of all this is 63 cents for each of us; and somehow not really very much moral outrage over a savings and loan debacle that will cost each of us and our children several thousand dollars apiece? Writing a few hundred dollars worth of bad checks, personal sexual behavior, prompt intense moral sensitivity and outrage. But that a United States Ambassador was paid several million dollars by Kuwait to go home and lobby for United States military action is mentioned in the paper once and forgotten.

The reason, says Marty, is something called "High Concept," an idea so simple it can be pitched in a 15-second TV spot. If you can't make a movie out of it, it won't be noticed. "High Concept is Murphy Brown, earthquakes, Mike Tyson, Willie Smith."

Martin Marty says this creates problems for religion, particularly our variety - that is the kind of religion that tries to be thoughtful and faithful to Jesus' mandate. High Concept religion is what happens on television - religion which "screens out doubt, paradox, ambiguity and the dark night of the soul" and offers instead "one way, finality, security, sunshine spirituality and instant salvation... each dramatized in 15-second bites." [see Christian Century, 6/18/92, p. 631]

If I'm reading this right, there is no way to be a Christian without being religious. But there is a lot of latitude to define what "religious" means, and Jesus himself defined and illustrated in ways that were new and fresh and radical. But there are no quick fixes, easy methods, shortcuts, nor are there simple rules for every situation.

What there is is a precious tradition that does give us a firm foundation on which to make personal decisions. It is very old. It does define what "being religious" is.

Love God - love God thoroughly with everything in you.

Love God with your mind - your intelligence, your wonderful ability to think and figure things out and plan and project and calculate.

Love God with your heart - your passion, your art, your music, poetry, your strong love, your high hopes, your moral fervor, your Eros.

Love God with your soul - your seeking, longing spirit which longs for God, seeks for God, sometimes argues with and doubts God, and which prays for help and strength and courage.

Love God with all your might - and your neighbor as yourself.

How to do it, Jesus? What shall we actually do? How shall we inherit eternal life? How shall we love so thoroughly that eternal life will be ours?

He did not give the man a list of duties. See yourself, he told that man, in this story...

See yourself in those two well-meaning religious types who walked by.

See yourself in the man who on this occasion, at least, knew exactly what love for neighbor means and simply and deliberately did what was necessary to help a person in need.

And, see yourself in that man - that woman - lying by the road, the one who on this day, is the victim.

If you want to be a Christian, if you want ultimately to learn how to love so thoroughly that you are truly alive, then learn from that one, about the love of a saving God who comes to you whenever you are abandoned, wounded, vulnerable and alone, and in whose love your love is enabled and nurtured and encouraged.

What I think he really wanted was for the lawyer not only to start using his intelligence in loving his neighbor, but also to hear and to know that he too was a child of God, loved by God, pursued and sought by God, searched and found by God along the roadside of his own spiritual journey and therefore forever safe in God.

That's it finally. There is no shortcut, no simple formula. There is a mandate to love and there is a promise that we are loved, that our Lord Jesus Christ wants us as his own, bids us live in him. Which means in love with God and our neighbor.

How to be a Christian? How to be...?

"Do this," he said, "and you will live." All praise to him.

+ + + + + +

O God, you search us and know us. And there is nowhere we can go that you will not find us. Remind us of your mysterious presence.

And as we try to live faithfully in love with you and our neighbors, help us to see clearly; give us courage to make difficult decisions, and in all we do keep us in the safety of your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.